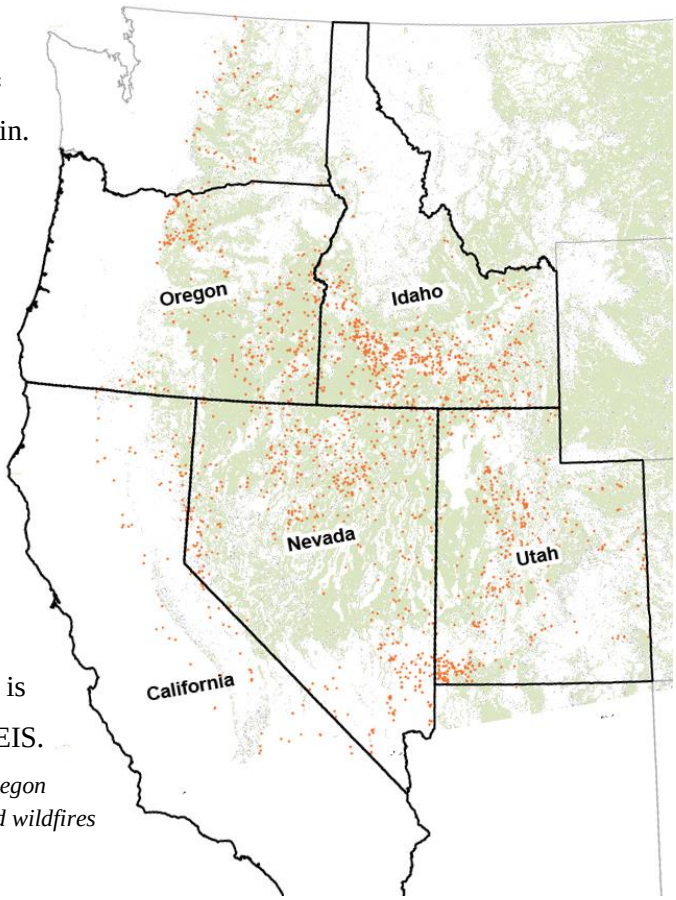
2018 SPRING UPDATE

Sage-Steppe Conservation in the Great Basin

Steppe It Up: BLM Planning Work Moves Ahead

Maybe you've heard that BLM is preparing two "Programmatic Environmental Impact Statements," or PEISs, for the Great Basin. You may also be aware that BLM is working on land-use plan amendments for sage grouse plans that were adopted in 2015. All three of these are major projects. They're all separate, but linked in their general purpose. And if you're a bit unsure about the specific purpose of each, it's understandable. It can be confusing.

We're trying to eliminate much of that confusion with this newsletter. We'll explain just what each document is intended to do, plus outline the next few steps. We'll start with the two PEISs. One is the Fuel Breaks Programmatic EIS and the other is the Fuels Reduction and Rangeland Restoration Programmatic EIS.



Above: BLM rangeland drill, Soda Fire rehabilitation in Malheur County, Oregon
Right: Great Basin map with the sagebrush-steppe biome (green) and reported wildfires from 2007-2017(orange) on public land >299 acres

During the summer of 2017, the Centennial Fire (left) burned into an existing fuel break (right) and stopped, Elmore County, Idaho.

Fuel Breaks Programmatic EIS

Slowing Down Wildfires

BLM uses fuels breaks to slow wildfires. They've been in use for a long time. Large-scale wildfires have dramatically increased in the Great Basin over the last 30 years. A continuous bed of fuels is a big contributor to the size and rapid rate of growth of these wildfires. The concept behind fuel breaks is to break up or fragment continuous fuels by reducing vegetation in key places. When a wildfire burns into a fuel break, the flame lengths decrease and its progress slows. That allows firefighters to more effectively suppress the blaze. Fuel breaks in strategic places slow the progress of fires, reduce their size, protect valuable resources, and most importantly, provide greater safety to the public and firefighters.

Fuel breaks can be established in several ways: mowing, blading, herbicides, planting fire-resistant vegetation, mastication or targeted livestock grazing. They are relatively inexpensive when compared to the cost of suppressing a fire and have proved their effectiveness many times over. Most fuel breaks follow existing roads or topographical features, so there's usually not a huge alteration to the landscape.

BLM finished public "scoping meetings" for fuel breaks (and rangeland restoration, but we'll get to that in a minute) in late winter. Those meetings, and the public comments we received, will help us to define the issues as we develop planning alternatives to analyze in the PEIS.

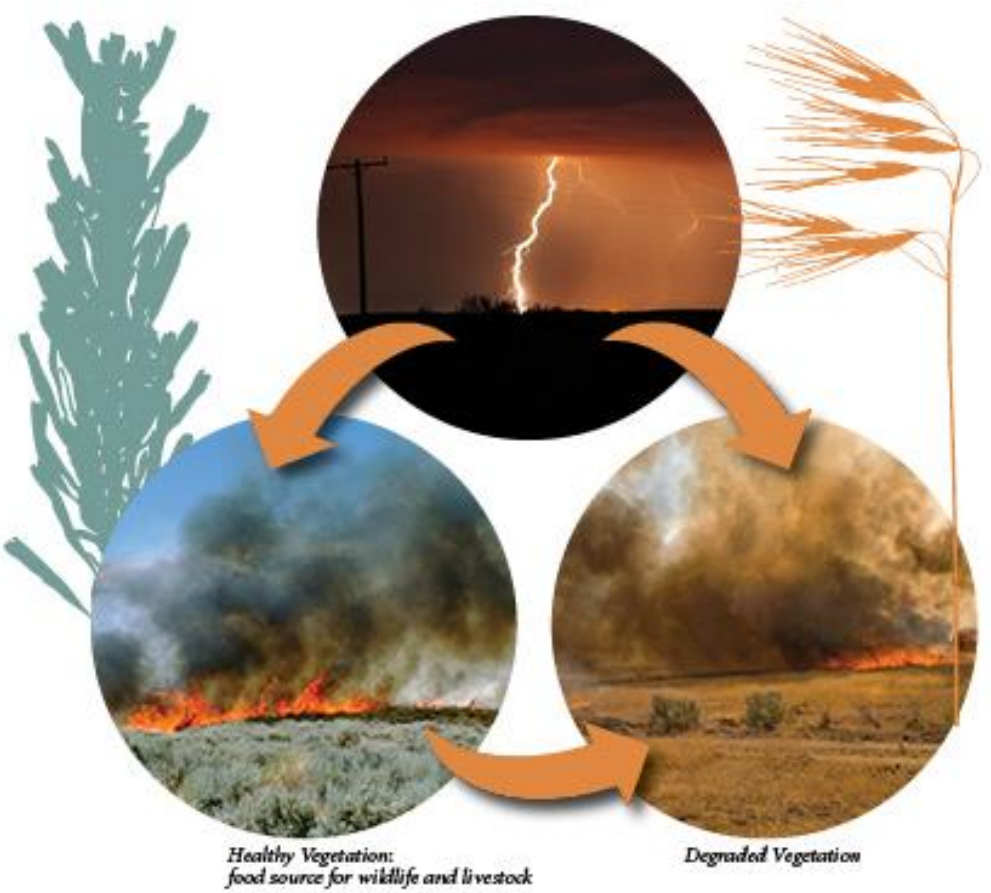
What the Fuel Breaks PEIS Can Do

BLM will have dozens, maybe hundreds, of fuel breaks projects in the coming few years. The PEISs provide a standard analysis of common elements in such projects required by the National Environmental Policy Act, or NEPA. When a BLM district or field office wants to establish a fuel break, it can plug into (or "tier" to) the PEIS for the required analysis,

and in many cases that portion of the work is done. Doing the work now, on a Great Basin-wide basis, will facilitate project work on-the-ground later, when time becomes more critical.

Rangeland Restoration Programmatic EIS

Breaking the Cycle



Wildfires of 100,000 acres or more were not common three decades ago; now, it seems there are at least several each year in the Great Basin. When low-elevation, low-precipitation rangeland burns, it may take decades before the land recovers, if it does at all. Too often, invasive species including cheatgrass and juniper, move into the burned area and become the dominant species. Cheatgrass, in particular, is prone to burning, so the wildfire-and-invasive-species cycle can become an endless loop: the more fire, the more invasive plants. The more invasive plants, the more fire. Effective restoration of burned areas becomes critical to halt the cycle before it begins. Restoration helps native vegetation—which is usually much more fire-resistant than non-native species—to establish itself. Restoration practices include re-seeding, hand-planting sagebrush and other techniques. BLM relies on a variety of partners to help with restoration, including other federal agencies, state agencies, conservation groups, and private interests.

What the Rangeland Restoration PEIS Can Do

The rangeland restoration PEIS's purpose is similar to the fuel breaks PEIS. As projects are being developed by BLM district and field offices, the PEIS will have already completed much of the required NEPA analysis.

Scoping for the programmatic rangeland restoration PEIS was done at the same time as the fuel breaks PEIS and for the same reason: to get a handle on issues that can be analyzed as alternatives are developed.

The bottom line is this: the results of the two PEISs will help keep some wildfires small while providing better safety for the public and firefighters, and perhaps, speed the recovery of burned areas.

Both PEISs will be prepared by a team in Boise, Idaho.

Land-use Plan Amendments

The third environmental planning effort involves amending sage-grouse plans that were put into effect in 2015. You may already know that managing populations of wildlife are the responsibility of states, almost always a part of a state fish and game agency's duties. But the habitat on federal land is the responsibility of federal agencies.

It's common sense that the plans for populations and plans for habitat are compatible. But that isn't always the case, and addressing the differences in the state and federal plans is what the land-use plan amendment process is all about. It seeks to bring the plans into alignment. By law (the 1976 Federal Land Policy and Management Act), BLM is required to coordinate with states on land-use plans. Western governors also asked BLM to amend the 2015 plans. The current planning amendment work won't replace the current plans, but will build upon them.

A scoping period was completed in December 2017. Draft Environmental Impact Statements (DEISs) were announced on May 4, 2018, with a 90-day comment period that ends on August 2.

Overall, up to 98 land-use plans in 11 western states may be affected. The states involved in the planning amendment DEISs are Colorado, Idaho, Nevada/California, Oregon, Utah and Wyoming. As of now, it seems that some states and members of the public want major changes in the federal plans, some want moderate changes, and some seek minor changes. That's a good reason for BLM to approach the amendments on a state-by-state basis.

Wrapping It Up

We hope this clarifies the two planning efforts underway over the next year in the Great Basin, and in the third case, in six western states. It's important work. The result of all this should be smaller wildfires, safer conditions for the public and firefighters, and improved sagebrush-steppe habitat for wildlife, recreation, and those who depend on the land for their livelihoods. It will also strengthen relationships among state, federal and other partners. Those are outcomes worth pursuing.

Right: Citizen volunteers watch a biologist demonstrate how to plant native shrub seedlings in an area burned by a human-caused fire.